Encouraging Students to Take Charge of Their Learning[1]
Abant Izzet Baysal University, Bolu
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Below is the basic outline of what was presented at the mini-ELT Conference held at Abant Izzet Baysal University in Bolu. The ideas may be considered rather radical for education in Turkey, but I was not recommending full adoption, rather as 'food for thought' on how to get students to become more responsible and more independent in their learning.

PART ONE
UNIVERSITY STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS:
Think of the characteristics of typical university students in Turkey.

What are some of the characteristics of *ideal* university students?
> *Mature*
> *Smart*
> *Inquisitive*
> *Independent*
> *Responsible*
> *Creative*

We often want university students to possess these characteristics so they are more engaged in the classroom, they contribute wisely to discussions/topics being addressed, and they start internalizing the content.

PART TWO

TRUE/FALSE
Think of your own classrooms when reading the statements below. As a teacher, are these statements true or false for your classroom? If you are a student, think about your teachers' actions/policies.

1. I have an attendance policy for my class that I enforce.
2. I distribute a syllabus for the course and I read it/explain it to the students at the beginning of the semester.

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[1] This presentation was written with university students in mind, but perhaps some of the principles can be applied to secondary school aged students. This ideas included here are taken the book: *The Learner-Centered Classroom* by Maryellen Weimer.

3. I start class a bit late because students arrive late. I repeat points in class for those who missed or who were late.
4. Students can get most if not all information from my classes online.

DISCUSSION
1. I have an attendance policy for my class that I enforce.

Why?

Do you have any control over the policy for attendance? What is the reason for having a minimum attendance policy? Is there more to the policy? i.e. Is it ok if the students are physically there, but not mentally there? Can they be asked to leave if they are only physically present?

Being a student at university in the States generally represents the real beginning of freedom/independence/responsibility. With that freedom comes decision making power. Students should *want* or *need* to come class.

Want = enjoy class or understands the benefits from attendance without being told they must attend.

Need = the class offers something other than a summary of readings, or summary of grammar points (offers practice of language/interaction couldn't otherwise get)

2. I distribute a syllabus for the course and I read it/explain it to the students at the beginning of the semester.

The students' first example

Preparing and distributing the syllabus is first step to help student to be responsible learners. Students should know from the beginning the expectations of the course for the term. However, the teacher shouldn't necessarily READ the syllabus to the students. That's more akin to spoonfeeding and it's something to try to get away from if we want them to develop responsibility.

3. I start class a bit late because students arrive late. I repeat points in class for those who missed or who were late.

What message does this send?

While it may send the message that the instructor holds the overall authority for the classroom if it's the instructor who decides to start things late, it also sends the message that the first 5-10 minutes are not important and just perpetuates a late start; class doesn't hold the importance it should etc.

4. Students can get most if not all information from my classes online or summaries of the readings in class.

Why come?

If students can get all the information elsewhere, why should they come to class? They are just being encouraged to take a short cut and either not come to class or not do the assigned reading. Language classes should provide practice and interaction; content classes should not just summarise the reading homework, but present another side, different views so the students can compare/contrast, synthesize (higher order thinking skills).

PART THREE
THREE PRINCIPLES FOR LEARNER RESPONSIBILITY

1. It's about who is responsible for what in the teaching-learning process.

The instructor traditionally sets everything (the lesson plan, the assignments, the due dates, the quiz/exam dates). The teacher is the expert, it's his/her classroom, s/he knows best. Students are to follow along; do what is assigned when it is assigned; this leaves them essentially dependent in the learning process with very little input. However, one way to help develop a sense of responsibility and independence in students is to start involving the learner in some of the classroom and learning decisions. Have students decide on a/some due date/s; this starts to help them to learn how to plan. Let students voice what helps/hurts them in the learning process while in class with the "Graffiti Need Assessment" to set some class policies (see below). Setting such an agreement should help students feel more responsible for what happens in the classroom.

While it's very natural as a teacher to summarize information for students, another way to aid in students' learning/responsibility is to ask **them** to make the summary. It's a great way to finish the class:

Possible Summarizing Methods:
Have students summarize in the last couple minutes
One student take notes on transparency during class – last few minutes get everyone together to see what should be underlined

Write summaries to hand in – tie in previous material
Predict what might make it on an exam/ write an exam question

2. It's about logical consequences, not discipline.

Part of developing maturity, responsibility and independence is to have choices and learn how to set priorities among all of the responsibilities. Students need to understand that their choices in education have consequences that affect their future success in learning. For example that their *not* doing homework/reading for class affects their understanding of the topic. Or that their late arrival causes them to miss key information they will need to get elsewhere (from a classmate rather than taking additional time away from the teacher). At university, making wise learning choices is important; logical consequences should be the driving decision-making force rather than avoiding punishment or humiliation in class.

3. It's about consistency in word and deed.

What rules there are in class, the instructor should stick to. If students sense an instructor will bend rules, there is not much point to have the policies. For this reason, rules should be chosen carefully. For example, if an instructor says no late papers will be accepted at all, but then accepts a late paper from a student, a precedent is set that the rules can be broken/bent for certain circumstances. Other students notice this. One example of being more sympathetic to students' needs is to set a policy of points off for each day a paper is late. This way, students know they can submit papers late, but for each day, they lose valuable points. Actions speak louder than words in this case. We all know things come up and some projects/homework gets sidelined, but the consequence might be better as reducing points rather than trying to determine which student excuse deserves more time to turn in homework etc.

GRAFFITI NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Directions: Put the sentence stems on flip chart paper, tape them up around the room and have students walk around and complete the sentence stems like 'graffiti'. If the class is too large or not ready for such 'responsible' graffiti, this could be done as individual feedback to ensure students answer more honestly.

The results of this needs assessment can be used to set a classroom policy so that class runs more smoothly, activities are designed for optimal learnig, and irritating behavior is reduced.

In the best class I ever had, students...

In the best class I ever had, the teacher...

I learn best when....

I feel most comfortable as a learner when...

Classmates compromise my learning when...

Student/Teacher behavior that irritates me...